

The South Danvers Observer

“Half Of Our Citizens”

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“At present, half of our citizens, the mothers of the country, the people who do more to build brains than anyone else, occupy their minds all their lives with small private affairs. . . if we, as people, as individuals, can rise to the demands of our time, we can make a bigger place in history than has ever before been attained. . .”
Peabody Free Press
May 25, 1905

—The names of the men who fought in the Civil War have been recorded on paper and carved into stone. Their sacrifice and their courage are remembered and often re-enacted to this day.

Though most people realize women served as nurses during this terrible war, only a few, such as Dorothea Dix and Clara Barton, are now remembered.

But one such woman came from South Danvers. Mary Ophelia Townsend was born on March 29, 1842, the daughter of Daniel Hacker and Rebecca Ophelia (Gould) Townsend. Though little is known of Daniel and Rebecca Townsend’s political beliefs, Mary would write later in life that *“My father trained me in my childhood days to expect this right [referring to his belief in equal rights for women].”*

No doubt the Townsend family also supported Abolition, because no sooner had the Civil War begun than her brothers, Eugene and Charles, enlisted to fight.

Eugene Putnam Townsend (1846-c.1890), was one of the youngest volunteers from South Danvers, entering the Army at the age of fifteen. Her brother Charles (b. 1844) wasn’t much older. He joined the Army at the age of seventeen.

Mary’s fervor burned no less bright. Though it is uncertain when she left South Danvers, records indicate that in 1864, she was working at the Seminary Hospital in Washington, D.C. By that time in the war, hospitals in Washington D.C. were the primary source of care for



Mary Ophelia Townsend Stevens
1842-1928

Picture taken about 1864, during her years as a nurse at Seminary Hospital in Washington D.C.

soldiers who had been brought in from the battlefield. Mary also worked with Clara Barton after the war ended in the newly created Columbia Hospital for Women, which opened in 1866.

Only one photograph of Mary Townsend from that time is available. She looks much younger than her twenty-two years. Her hair is cropped, hinting at her progressive beliefs. And she gazes at the camera in a straightforward manner.

About this time, a young Navy Quartermaster, who’d recently received the Medal of Honor for his bravery during the Second Battle of Fort Fisher in North Carolina lingered in Washington D.C. for some months after receiving his Medal.

Daniel Dickinson Stevens (1839-1916) met Mary Townsend about this time. Though Daniel was born in Tennessee, his father came from

New Hampshire and his mother from Boston.

Mary and Daniel married in 1868. They lived in Boston for several years, where Daniel worked as a police officer. Soon after, he and Mary came to Peabody to stay with her parents. Daniel put his Navy experience to use and worked as a mariner before becoming a railroad crossing guard for the town.

From the moment of their arrival in Peabody, Mary labored tirelessly for women’s suffrage. She helped form and was president of the Peabody Suffrage Club. She petitioned Congress again and again to grant women the vote. Her frustration with the lack of progress was evident in the fact that when Massachusetts gave women the right to vote for local school committees, Mary didn’t register. Like many women, she seemed to have recognized it for the half-hearted concession it was.

Mary and Daniel never had children of their own. However, in the 1890s, they took in a ward, Catherine Hackett, whose parents and siblings had died of tuberculosis. Mary and Daniel cared for her until her marriage around 1907.

Mary Townsend Stevens lived to see women granted the right to vote. On Aug. 20, 1920, at the age of 78, Mary walked from her home at 3 Holten Street to City Hall where she registered for the right to vote in a national election.

Helen Sullivan Donahue, 1893-1972

—When Mortimer and Annie J. (Hassett) Sullivan came from Ireland in the mid-1880s, no doubt they hoped for better opportunities for themselves and the children they would have. Their second daughter and middle child, Helen, certainly lived up to and perhaps exceeded all their expectations.

Helen Sullivan was born November 30, 1893, the third of five children of Mortimer and Annie Sullivan. The family made their home at 44 Wallis Street. Helen's older brother and sister were Benjamin and Beatrice and her younger sister and brother were Mildred and Frederick. Tragically, Frederick was killed in 1918 at the age of 13 when struck by an automobile.

The Sullivan children attended St. John's School in Peabody. After Helen's graduation from high school, she volunteered for the Navy in 1915 and served as a chief yeoman in the Naval Reserve in Charlestown. Most of these women worked as clerks and secretaries. But they paved the way for the WAVES who served in the Navy during WWII.

During the First World War, women were not allowed aboard Naval vessels. However, sailors were required to be attached to a ship for their service. The Navy solved this problem by attaching



Helen Sullivan Donahue
in the mid-1920s

the women to ships that had perished at sea.

During her service, Helen was a member of the first Women's Rifle Team, becoming one of the best shots on the team. After the war, she worked as a nurse with disabled veterans at the Parker Hill Hospital in Boston (now the New England Baptist Hospital).

Though she had achieved much by the age of 26, her desire to do more didn't end. In 1920, she was named the first woman postal clerk in Peabody. Soon after, she married George J. Donahue of Salem. Not even marriage slowed

her down.

George and Helen traveled to Washington DC where George went to school and they both taught at a school for disabled war veterans. When Helen and George were expecting their first child, they returned to Boston for George to continue his studies at Boston College. After graduation, he went onto Harvard Dental School to become an orthodontist.

They had two children, Fredericka and George Jr. Helen's thirst for knowledge never ended. She'd longed to become a lawyer for some time and, with her husband's support, attended the Portia School of Law, a sister school of Suffolk Law University. She graduated around 1935. When she took the bar, Helen achieved the third highest grade in the state. Many of the men who'd taken the bar at the same time were outraged, thinking that she'd cheated and demanded her test be reviewed. But when it was, her grade was confirmed. She practiced law in Boston for a year or so before returning to Peabody in 1936.

Helen and George settled in their home on Washington Street, to prepare for George to set up his orthodontist practice. Helen also hoped to begin her law practice. But soon after, Helen had a visit from four local lawyers. This was no social call. They informed her that if she tried to practice law in Peabody, her husband's business would suffer.

She wrestled with her decision for a while. In the end, she gave up her law practice. Instead, she turned her energies into raising her children and urging all women, her daughter Fredericka included, to aim as high as they could in life and never give up on their dreams.



First Women's Rifle Team

Helen Sullivan is in first row,
third from the right.

Martha Osborne Barrett, 1827-1905

—Were it not for her diaries, it is doubtful few today would ever have known the name Martha Osborne Barrett. As a single woman whose range of influence seldom extended beyond Essex County, she experienced all the ups and downs, joys and sorrows of the working poor of her day.

Martha hated being poor. And while it is expected that those struggling to make ends meet would express such sentiments, Martha's diaries, which she kept for thirty-three years, exposed the depth of her frustrations with her situation in life.

Martha Osborne Barrett was born in South Danvers, the daughter of Jonathan and Gertrude (Pope) Barrett. In 1829, Jonathan died, leaving Gertrude with two year old Martha and her brother, Eleazar, who was only seven. The 1830 and 1840 census records list Gertrude as the head of the family, which not only included Martha and Eleazar, but also two older women, one of whom was their relative, Lydia Buxton. While Gertrude could have received compensation for the care of these women, her family's limited means probably forced her to take in "outwork" to sustain her household.

Many textile and leather industries assigned piecework to men and women able to weave cloth or assemble shoes at home. Stitching shoe tops was a common occupation for many women in Danvers at the time and it is very likely



Martha Osborne Barrett
in 1890

Gertrude brought in extra income this way.

Like his father, Eleazar farmed the family's land which was located on Central Street. With the combined work of her brother and mother as well as her own labors, Martha was able to attend the Westfield Normal School. At the time, Martha would have boarded with local families, as all the students did. In addition to that fee, Westfield Normal School charged \$1.75 a week for the 42 weeks required for Martha's graduation in 1849.

That same year, Martha found work teaching in Woburn. Though she seemed to have earned satisfactory reviews from the School Committee, Martha didn't enjoy teaching. And so, in 1855, she found work in David Mead's Danversport factory stitching shoes. But that, too, failed to give Martha what she so longed for. More time to read.

"I have been very ambitious and dreamed of a life of pleasant leisure, devoted to literature and its kindred pursuits—but how differently am I now situated." [Martha Osborne Barrett Diary, Aug. 3, 1855]

Her next attempt at finding work, which would not only provide her with a decent wage, but also the time she longed for was in Salem at the Fletcher millinery store on Essex Street. None of these occupations, including the sewing she took in, fulfilled her truest desire.

"Would that I was an artist."

[Martha Osborne Barrett Diary, October 22, 1854]

Being forced to work long hours not only kept her from her poetry and painting, but also seems to have brought on bouts of depression. Eventually, Martha was able to find the time she needed for her art. She wrote many poems and in 1880 was listed on the census as a teacher of painting.

While she never married, she turned her energies to civic organizations. For many years, she served as secretary of the Ladies' Unitarian Association of the Peabody Unitarian Church. She wrote a hymn for the dedication of the 50th anniversary of the Unitarian Church in Peabody. She also wrote many anti-slavery poems and often read them at civic events.

She died October 14, 1905.

*"For Slavery now approaches,
your loved New England homes,
Within your own charmed circles there,
his baneful influence comes,
Then stand up in your womanhood,
erect and true and free,
Give voice, and pen, and earnest
prayer, till your sister too is free."*

Appeal to New England Women"
by Martha Osborne Barrett,
written after she read
Uncle Tom's Cabin

*"Work, hard and almost unremitting
has made me necessarily very
negligent of my pen.... Some
pursuit than what I am at present
engaged in would be more
congenial to my taste – but mere
taste cannot be always consulted. It
is absolutely necessary for me to do
something to earn money and this
work seems to be the most
available just now. So I am steadily
at work."*

From the July 29, 1855 Diary of
Martha Osborne Barrett

*"Despondency with cloaked wing is
hovering over me,"*
From the August 4, 1855 Diary of
Martha Osborne Barrett

Other Women of Interest

Sarah Frances Kittredge, 1836-1920

—Though she was not the first women elected to the Peabody School Committee, Sarah Frances Kittredge was the first woman who agreed to serve as a member.

Sarah Frances Kittredge was born in Harvard, Massachusetts on Oct. 24, 1836, the daughter of Floyer and Sarah Kittredge. Floyer worked as a physician in Harvard, Massachusetts. When the Civil War broke out, he volunteered for the 31st Massachusetts Infantry as a surgeon. He served in New Orleans during its occupation by Union forces. After his resignation in January 1864, the Kittredge family moved to South Danvers where Floyer opened his practice.

Sarah Frances Kittredge graduated from the Lawrence



Sarah Frances Kittredge
c. 1870

Academy of Groton, MA in 1854. Whether she ever taught school is unknown. After her father's death, Sarah served as President of the Women's Relief Corp, the women's auxiliary of the Grand Army of the Republic. She also served as the President of the Ladies Unitarian Association and was also a member of the Peabody Historical Society.

In 1892, Sarah was elected to the Peabody School Committee. She served on the committee until 1906.

On Oct. 24, 1913, she went to live with a cousin in Pueblo, Colorado, where she died on Jan. 5, 1920.



Helen Clark Hagar
in 1915

Helen Clark Hagar, 1896-1984

—Helen Clark Hagar's roots in Peabody ran deep. Her grandfather was Benjamin Hill, who was one of three men from Peabody who were prisoners at Dartmoor during the War of 1812. Helen's father owned an express company in the town from the 1890s until 1920.

Helen Clark Hagar was born on September 8, 1896. She graduated from Peabody High School in 1915. Sometime later, probably in the 1920s, she attended the George Vesper School of Art which was located in Boston. After her graduation, she moved to Salem to live with her mother and aunt and worked in the art field restoring antique furniture and other works of art.

She lived in Salem until her death in 1984.

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